

Traditions, History, Education of the Italian Army's NCO Corps

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The Italian Army and its NCO Corps were officially founded on the 4th of May 1861, but their traditions date as far back as the legions of the Roman Empire in the first century B.C..

The Roman legions were extremely organized and included personnel with a variety of specializations. Every legion was formed by about 5,200 infantrymen, 120 cavalrymen divided in two "wings", 100 men responsible to operate the war machines, and the HQ personnel, for a total of 6,000 men. Among legionnaires there were those specialized in providing security to the camps; the road, bridge, and fortification builders; those responsible for water and food supplies; doctors, veterinarians, and even priests for religious ceremonies. Tribunes commanded the legions, but the Centurions were those who really led their men in battle and were always closest to them (Restaino 102). The Centurions were the actual driving force of the legions and could be compared to today's NCOs.

Following the fall of the Roman Empire, Italy was divided into countless kingdoms, counties and, of course, the Vatican State which included the entire central part of the peninsula, dividing it in half. The southern regions experienced domination by the Normans, the Moors, the French and the Spanish, while the northern part was ravaged by barbarian invasions, the Spanish, and the Austro-Hungarian empire. It's not until the independence wars (1848) and the declaration of the country's unification under the rule of the Savoy royal family, that Italy could consider itself a nation (1861). That same year the unification of the armies belonging to the various local entities gave life to the Royal Italian Army. The first campaigns were still focused toward the creation of the nation and culminated with the conquest of Rome from the Vatican State on the 20th of September 1870 (<http://www.esercito.difesa.it>). It's in this period that the structure of the Italian Army's NCO Corps starts to be established with the identification of the sergeants' rank.

In 1903 this single category was split and, while the sergeants continued to exist as junior NCOs, the maresciallo rank was established to give senior NCOs further distinction and credit (<http://www.esercito.difesa.it>).

Some sources indicate that the sergeant rank originated in the Middle ages and was formerly used to identify the person in charge of coordinating the work of all the knight's servants (<http://www.esercito.difesa.it>). Other sources report that the actual word sergente, the Italian for sergeant, originated from the specialty of medieval outer flank infantrymen. These units were made of the most experienced soldiers and had the responsibility of maintaining cohesion of the battle formation. Whenever the troops were hit by enemy fire, cavalry, or infantry charges, the men on the outer flanks literally pushed soldiers towards the center of the formation where the most effective effort had to be concentrated. They were called "serra" (the Italian verb "to hold together", "to keep tight") "gente" (the Italian word for "people") and throughout the centuries the words blended to the point that a true leader, one who was able to build a team, to keep his men together in difficult moments, became sergente (<http://www.esercito.difesa.it>). Today, in Italy, the sergeant's category is used to indicate junior NCOs and includes two ranks, the sergente (comparable to the U.S sergeant) and the sergente maggiore (comparable to the U.S. sergeant first class) (<http://www.perscom.army.mil>).

The maresciallo rank is supposed to have an equally old history that may be traced back to the year 1185 when it was first introduced in France. It originated from the two Arab words "marah" and "skalk" that mean respectively horse and servant. Therefore, servant of the horse, which, in those days, was a humble yet extremely important job. Hence the double use of the word Maresciallo to indicate both the top military rank, as well as the cavalry NCO rank, comparable to the infantry sergeant. This rank first appeared in the Italian language and

documents starting in 1427 (<http://www.esercito.difesa.it>). A "Maresciallo d'Italia" was figuratively intended to be the king's right hand or the defender of the nation's military fortunes, which put him to the top of military hierarchy. Second only to the "Capitano Generale" (General Captain), rank that belonged to the king, the "Maresciallo d'Italia" remains the top Italian Army rank until the end of WWII. In the meantime, starting in 1903, the word maresciallo is starting to be used to indicate senior NCOs, to distinguish them from the sergeants. Throughout the past century, many different meanings have been given to the maresciallo rank but all had some kind of logistic connotation (<http://www.esercito.difesa.it>). In 1998, with the decision to transform the Italian Army from a conscript to a volunteer organization, and again in 2001, the senior NCO rank structure was changed to today's configuration which includes five ranks: maresciallo (staff sergeant), maresciallo ordinario (first sergeant or master sergeant), maresciallo capo, 1st maresciallo and 1st maresciallo luogotenente (sergeant major, command sergeant major, warrant officer) (<http://www.perscom.army.mil>).

The first school destined to educate active duty NCOs of all branches of service in the Italian Army was founded on the 1st of July 1888 in the city of Caserta. This school operated until the 30th of September 1895 forming some 1283 NCOs of all military specialties and giving them a solid, common background education. Increased needs of the Army for more NCOs and a quicker education cycle imposed the substitution of the school in Caserta with various other institutions tasked to form NCOs already destined to specific branches of service. Such a system was maintained also between WWI and WWII when the NCO schools of Milano, Modena, Verona, Pola, Rieti, Casagiove and Nocera Inferiore were operational. After WWII the whole Italian Army was reorganized and in May 1948 the unified NCO school of Spoleto was inaugurated. In 1951 a technical NCO school for all technical specialty NCOs came to life in

Rieti. In 1965, the Italian Army General Staff decided to create a unified NCO school in Viterbo. A unified education system was organized for all NCO branches with the intention of increasing basic skills, enhancing cultural development in general knowledge subject areas, and boost the prestige of the NCO category. Such NCO Education System (NCOES) lasted until 1996. It was designed to give NCOs a satisfactory cultural background, adequate physical, spiritual formation, and the necessary technical and professional skills to succeed as a small unit (squad, team, and, in select cases, platoon) commander. In the beginning, courses lasted 6 months. They were brought to 1 year having personnel graduate with the sergeant rank. NCOs were then sent to specialization courses that lasted from 1 (infantry) to 3 years (helicopter pilots and medics) depending on the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). In 1996 a new NCOES transformation took place and, in 1998, the first 2 year long maresciallo course began at the NCO Academy in Viterbo. Admittance to the course is granted to candidates who have a high school graduation degree and successfully pass various tests including cultural, psychological, and physical screenings. Most candidates come directly from the civilian environment although a specific percentage of places is reserved for active duty personnel. The inclusion of women in the Italian Armed Forces is one of our latest important achievements because it constitutes our latest step towards modernization and one of our greatest challenges for the future. Class size is determined strictly by the Army's need for NCOs. The 2-year course gives students the necessary cultural, ethical, professional, and technical background relevant to their MOS as well as a 2 year college degree. The Academy is also responsible for the training of sergeants, permanent duty volunteers, and short time volunteers, within dependant regiments in all of Italy (<http://www.esercito.difesa.it>).

Following graduation, newly appointed marescialli will be sent to their units. Their primary task is to be platoon leaders in whichever unit they're sent to and mandatory platoon leader time periods must be accomplished before being cleared for promotion from the Maresciallo Ordinario to the Maresciallo Capo rank (<http://www.esercito.difesa.it>). The Italian senior NCO's duties and responsibilities are becoming very similar to those of senior NCOs within the U.S. Army. The position of Company, Battalion, and Regiment senior NCO have now been established in Italy too. The fact that the enormous "hands-on experience" of the NCO Corps must be valued and used to its fullest extent is finally being understood and will hopefully reach higher levels such as Brigade, Division and Army.

Thousands of years of practical evolution in weapons technology and theoretical, philosophical, strategic, and tactical studies in the art of warfare lead us to develop a system now which isn't all that different from the one that Julius Caesar's Legions adopted to conquer all of the known world. Today, as in the 1st century B.C., the key tool of a winning army still lies in its ability to learn from past experiences. Modern NCOs, like the Centurions of 2000 years ago, are the link between past, present, and future constituting, therefore, the true backbone of any winning army.

Works Cited

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